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ABSTRACT

Predicated on the idea that students traveling and studying abroad must learn ways to cope with the loss of cultural symbols familiar to them, this paper uses a college student's personal travel experiences to examine what coping strategies helped and how the lessons learned could help others in the same situation. After pointing out that the primary reason for going abroad is usually to polish foreign language skills, the paper focuses on three phases of study abroad: (1) the stage prior to studying in another country (in this case, Mexico); (2) the stage in the host country; and (3) the reentry stage. The paper also mentions that, among many advantages, a study abroad program provides necessary learning tools in today's world and is on the cutting edge of expanding career possibilities. The paper concludes that a student develops the recognition and acceptance of differences and dimensions of other cultures and an objectivity about his or her own country, as a direct result of the study abroad experience. (Contains 16 references.) (NKA)

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CULTURE SHOCK:
A Student's Perspective of Study Abroad and the Importance of Promoting Study Abroad Programs

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When one makes plans to travel and is headed for a foreign destination, one would like to assume that the trip, whether it be for business or for pleasure, will be an enjoyable and memorable experience. But for some, however, the encounter with another culture can turn sour and may make them want to forget the entire experience. The culprit may be culture shock, a well known facet of traveling abroad. Each year more than eight million Americans venture beyond the borders of their homeland to immerse themselves in another culture (Gordon, 1992). One group hardest hit by culture shock is students who study abroad for either short or long periods of time. I myself was a member of a group of students destined for a dose of culture shock, when I spent the summer at La Universidad Autonoma de Guadalajara, in Guadalajara, Mexico.

Study abroad is becoming an increasingly popular method to improve the language skills of foreign language students, establish new international contacts for business majors, and promote the awareness and the significance of other cultures for other students in their respective majors. The difficult lessons traveling students must learn are ways to cope with the loss of familiar cultural symbols prevalent in the host country. When compiling the research on this paper, I asked myself, What things helped me and how could these lessons help other people? I have focused on three phases I faced when I studied abroad in Mexico: (1) the stage prior to studying in another country; (2) the stage in the host country; and (3) the reentry stage. This paper describes some of my observations about culture shock, a few of my coping strategies, and how one company, United Airlines, is focusing on the recognition of culture shock while promoting cultural awareness.

Even though my perspective may be similar to that of other sojourners, each individual experience makes up the framework to "fine tune" the difficulties one may face in a particular region or country. This information, a traveler's guide, which encompasses both the commonalities and the differences, may be of interest to those pursuing research in this related area.

Culture refers to the total system of values, beliefs, attitudes, traditions, and behavior norms regulating life among a particular group of people (Kornblum, 1991). Culture comprises various factors which arrange persons into various social groups and regulate both individual and group behavior. Culture also incorporates social norms, standard forms of conduct, religious beliefs and other common elements structured together to maintain social organization. In contrast, culture shock, according to anthropologist Kalvero Oberg "is brought on by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse" (Gordon, 1992).

Oberg also categorized six areas of culture shock: (1) Strain due to psychological adaptations; (2) A sense of loss and a feeling of deprivation with regard to friends, status, and profession; (3) Being rejected by and/ or rejecting members of the new culture; (4) Confusion in role, role expectations, values, feelings and self identity; (5) Surprise, anxiety, even disgust after becoming aware of cultural differences; and (6) Feelings of powerlessness due to not being able to cope with the new environment. As Dr.

Oberg has focused on the key factors of culture shock, new research is looking into the underlying issues which create cultural misunderstandings.

Arizona State researchers Michael Hecht and Linda Larkey, along with Jill Johnson derived nine issues salient to communication of ethnic identity: powerlessness, stereotyping, acceptance, goal attainment, authenticity, understanding, expressiveness, shared worldview, relational solidarity and relaxation (Human Communication Research, 209-236).

Those who face culture shock may experience symptoms as mild as feeling tired to severe reactions such as experiencing feelings of being victimized, paranoia, and possibly psycho-social problems, refusing most or even all components of the host culture. When one is suddenly immersed in a foreign culture, one may tend to not recognize the idea of what is actually considered quite normal in that culture. One may not be familiar with the cues used in that culture.

Oberg outlines some interesting thoughts about the powerful effects of culture shock.

> When an individual enters a strange culture, all or most of our familiar cues are removed . . . When to shake hands, . . . when and how to give tips; how to give orders to servants; how to make purchases; when to accept and when to refuse invitations; and when to take statements seriously or not. He or she is like a fish out of water. No matter how broad-minded or full of good will he may be, a series of props have been knocked out from under him (Gordon, p. 1).

One may compare this experience to the first day at a new job. One may be very unfamiliar with the new surroundings, co-workers, and what is expected, which creates stress and anxiety. Culture shock can be thought of as another analogy: driving a semi tractor as opposed to a small, compact car. Driving an eighteen wheeler would be possible for a novice, but it is assumed that the first few encounters behind the wheel would be rather awkward and difficult, unless one has had prior training driving trucks. I sometimes felt like I was driving an eighteen wheeler during the first few weeks in Mexico.

STAGE I: THE STAGE PRIOR TO STUDY ABROAD

The preparation for Mexico, before leaving Ohio, was essential in that it provided the opportunity to learn about the necessary cues that the students from The University of Toledo and I would encounter during our stay abroad. The orientation procedure covered everything from identifying specific details about the Mexican culture to possible barriers students might

encounter, such as deficiencies in language skills. Stereotypes commonly associated with the Hispanic culture were also discussed, as well as how Hispanics perceive our culture. Other important factors also included recognizing special words, phrases, facial expressions and gestures associated with interpersonal and non-verbal cues. Topics such as the cuisine and normal household routine were also brought to our attention, since what might be unusual in our society might be very normal in theirs. The prominence of culture shock and its effects, especially upon students were brought to our attention. This stage prior to our trip prepared us to recognize and acknowledge the fact that some elements of culture shock were bound to affect us in some form or another. Learning how to deal with the effects in an objective and rational manner was the key to overcoming them.

Even though I tried to familiarize myself with maps of the Mexican countryside, books which dealt with the Mexican people and the common customs associated with the Hispanic culture, as well as all of the information with which we were provided, I still had a lot of anxiety about what to expect, before arriving in Guadalajara. I was preoccupied primarily with all of the things that could go wrong. This turned out to be wasted energy, however, because nothing did go wrong. When a problem arose, I was usually capable of solving the problem as I would have done in Ohio. Over 20,000 cross-cultural training programs have been offered since 1951 to cross cultural sojourners such as foreign students, business personnel and government officials (Brislin, et al., 1986).

STAGE II THE STAGE IN THE HOST COUNTRY

When we arrived at Miguel Hidalgo International Airport, the first visible signs were the geographical features of the greater Guadalajara area. With its striking mountainous landscape, Guadalajara, which is situated about 5,500 feet above sea level was a truly dramatic change from the flat terrain of northwest Ohio. All eight of us in the group felt very disoriented. Not only was the scenery a shock, but so were the people. Security agents were telling us where to go, while taxi drivers pestered us to choose their taxi. Directly outside of immigration, people were clustered around a gate, waiting for friends and family to pass through customs. I was relieved that my host family, an upper-middle class Mexican family, were not like the seemingly hyperactive people at the airport. Almost immediately from my arrival, my hosts treated me like a member of their family and not like a guest. They tried their very best to make me feel right at home. I watched TV with them in the evenings, went out with their children, and accompanied them to social gatherings, to Church and other family outings. I was trying to live out of their shoes, their eyes and their culture. They made my stay in Mexico a wonderful one. There were situations where I did not comprehend the meaning of certain cues immediately. The family members always smiled and seemed very happy, perhaps too happy at times. I sometimes had the impression that they were trying to play jokes on me, or that they found something very amusing about me. Once I learned that Guadalajarans, otherwise known as "Tapatios," are well known for being warm and friendly people and that it is actually quite customary for those people to wear warm and friendly faces, it was easier to differentiate genuine friendliness from disingenuous mockery.

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The main meal, which was served around 2:00 in the afternoon, appeared to be the highlight of the day. Usually all of us conversed about how our day had been going. This mealtime break lasted from about 1:00 to 3:00 p.m., and also included the siesta. Even the family members who did not live in the home still made every effort to come visit and eat. Compared to the relatively fast pace at which the typical American family eats lunch, the meal proved to be a very formal event for the family. My limited knowledge of the language and a lack of understanding cultural cues created difficulties such as asking someone for directions in the confusing downtown area, going to the bank to cash travelers' checks or going shopping and dining out. A good example of learning new cultural manners was the close proximity when people conversed. It was a rather uncomfortable situation when many neighbors, as well as other members of the family, stood close to me when talking. I felt like they were invading my personal space. Being allergic to chicken and kidney beans also posed a problem. Even though I made it clear to my host mother that I could not eat chicken or beans, she tended to believe that she could prepare them in such a manner that they would not affect me. On several occasions she attempted to have me sample her dishes. It became imperative that I make it very clear that I could not eat those things. I finally solved the problem by being very direct with her and citing cases in the past where my allergies caused an emergency.

Both the family and I dealt with the common misconceptions and stereotypes from a humorous angle: that Mexicans believe Americans are extravagant and wasteful, that we spend all of our money, we have all of the answers, we have few moral values, and that we are all loud, obnoxious and domineering individuals; and that the Americans believe that all Mexicans have black hair, eat only tacos, and are lazy. Even though we looked at each other's perceived ideas and culture from a lax perspective, we were well aware of the problems these stereotypes have posed upon both cultures. Samovar and Porter (1982) tell us in the opening pages of their anthology:

> To crash another culture with only the vaguest notion of its underlying dynamics reflects not only a provincial naivete but a dangerous form of cultural arrogance (p. 7).

It was very upsetting when many upscale clubs and discotheques allowed me to enter because I was American, but denied my Mexican friends access because they were <u>not</u> different. Although this did not bother them, it was very difficult for me to accept this discrimination. During my stay I became aware of how to view my own country objectively from inside a different country. There were students, however, who did not want to try to learn about this intriguing culture. I will never forget one of the students, a young woman who every other night called her family and her boyfriend in California, constantly complaining about her host family, the food, and the problems of the city. During the latter part of the six weeks, she changed her attitude quickly when her parents called and informed her of a hefty 400-dollar phone bill awaiting her return. Her main line of communication (the phone lines) became her main undoing. Had she expended as much energy socializing with her Mexican host family, sampling the new cuisine and enjoying the interesting facets of the city as she spent complaining, she would have had nothing about which to complain.

After the "everything looks so quaint and pretty stage," I began to recognize some of the sociological differences between the Mexican and American cultures. I was not aware of the differences until the latter portion of my stay. I accepted the differences, so that I could develop a better level of interpersonal relationships. At the beginning it was extremely difficult to make new friends in Guadalajara, however, later on my situation improved greatly. I changed my methods of how I had gone out on social events at home and aimed my attitude more towards how a young Mexican might go about doing things on the weekends.

Kurt Lewin (1951), identified common training issues in cross cultural orientation. He devised a system for orienting travelers: concrete experiences and observations reflecting on these particular events. Next, one forms abstract concepts and generalizations. And the implications of these events could be tested in new situations later. Using this Lewin perspective, we can see how a student might face and deal with certain encounters in an unfamiliar culture. One prime example is how to effectively use phrases that are a part of common conversation. I had learned to use the word como at The University of Toledo when questioning what something meant. Como means "What did you say?" or "excuse me?" When I used the word in Guadalajara, however, the response time was delayed. I had heard the word, mande being used in place of como during the course of many conversations with my host family and at The Autonoma University. I added this new word to my vocabulary and noted improvements in my communication skills.

III THE REENTRY STAGE

The reentry stage proved to be a dramatic time for me. When I returned to Ohio, I came back poor in financial resources but rich in knowledge. I did encounter some mild difficulties in reverting to speaking English as well as in following my typical routine. This took roughly two weeks. I was rather disappointed when many of my friends did not share the same enthusiasm I had to be back home. Their lives had gone on without me. I needed to accept the fact that their lives had to go on in my absence. Although I changed, they did not. I had to endure the process of "reverse" culture shock, adapting and reverting back to the lifestyle I had before I left.

The entire study abroad experience was a memorable one--one that I will never forget. The experience also proved to be very moving and powerful for me in that I learned how to cope in an entirely new atmosphere of people, customs, values, standards of conduct and belief systems. The experience taught me to put aside my own ethnocentric beliefs.

The dynamics of a study abroad program are like no other program. The learning experience differs from the traditional classroom setting in that one is not just learning about a culture and studying a language in a classroom for three or four hours a day, but rather 24 hours a day. The family with which one lives, the people with whom one comes in contact, and the ambiance of the city and the country in which one resides are the classrooms for study

abroad. These facets of study abroad are actually the real teachers through which one learns the true meaning and significance of another culture.

Octavio Paz (1973), who is known worldwide for his literary works, wrote about the relationship between Mexico, Spain and the U.S. I believe that his book, The Labyrinth of Solitude, best summarizes my experience in Mexico. In the title, The Labyrinth of Solitude, the labyrinth is Mexico. It is the reality and the mystery of Mexico that remains hidden to the rest of the world. The solitude is the common destiny of all people and nations. This best describes the essence of the study abroad encounter: in order to really understand the people of another culture, one must go there and experience life first-hand. Paz said that "Man is the only being who knows he is alone." This quote perhaps best describes the feeling a student may have at certain times during the study abroad stage, as well as when a foreigner comes to the U.S. The sojourner may feel that he or she is being isolated because he or she cannot understand the facets of the culture.

Many aspects of the host culture may seem vague or strange. Perhaps one element of culture shock that needs to be taken into account is that airports need to pay close attention to foreign travelers. People tend to picture airports as cold and insensitive to the needs of travelers. I remember when I first arrived at Guadalajara's Miguel Hidalgo Airport. I arrived at an airport of chaos and confusion. That was the moment when I was literally submerged immediately in the Mexican culture. I could not turn back and go home. I could not turn off the incessant mumbling and the hundreds of people glaring at me. And I certainly could not make sense out of what everyone was saying and doing. When I had to press a button in order to pass through customs, I felt as if I were in a "James Bond 007" movie. If the light lit up green, then I could pass through with no questions asked by customs officials. However, if the light lit up red, then I had to open up my luggage. I later learned that this was to make suspected drug traffickers passing through nervous, enabling them to be more visible in a crowd. If it were not for my background knowledge of Spanish, I do not know how I could have made it through that airport. But try to imagine what it would be like if one did not know the language? How could one go about finding gate and flight information as well as locating rest rooms, restaurants and other necessary information? Airports and airlines are trying to erase the negative images associated with travel abroad.

A company in which cultural awareness is quite essential are airports. Airports need to be user friendly and culturally sensitive. Airports offer the first impression to those arriving in foreign countries, and are also the first place where travelers feel culture shock. All familiar cultural cues change virtually instantaneously. One cannot navigate with an increased level of anxiety. Airports are the liaison for international travelers who are in need of assistance. They should be geared more toward alleviating anxiety.

Concerns about air travel led me to talk with those who work in the airline industry and recognize the need for cultural awareness. Two individuals who have stood out and have promoted cultural awareness are Bob Hayes and Eileen Sweeney of United Airlines. Bob Hayes, (1992) manager for

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United Express Airlines in Toledo, Ohio, discussed the dire need for corporations to make their employees culturally conscious of other ways of life. Hayes stressed that because United Airlines recognizes cultural awareness, it is able to accommodate foreign passengers in ways that will satisfy them and enhance their trip and hence it retains more international customers. Hayes offered various examples of how United Airlines offers its passengers a taste of their foreign destination before they arrive. Chefs prepare special dishes typical of a particular country for in-flight meals. Movies as well as reading materials are in several languages.

Another individual who has spread her knowledge of cultural awareness is Eileen Sweeney, Senior Staff Representative in Corporate Training at United Airlines, at Chicago O'Hare International Airport. Sweeney has developed the "Best Airline" quality service program and is a consultant for United's 8 national and 20 international Systems Reservations Functions. She poses the question: "How can we equip a person to assist customers when the interaction may last only a few minutes or perhaps a few seconds?" Sweeney believes the answer lies in being culturally sensitive and having employees, not the passengers, make the adjustments. The airline now pays serious attention to details such as: (1) the views towards women; (2) views on punctuality; (3) business etiquette; (4) differing ideas of humor; and (5) language in general. Sweeney likes to stress the overall importance and value of a program that caters to an international, as opposed to strictly an American market. One of her greatest accomplishments is to see 15 to 20 year employees gain a new perspective and realize the significance of cultural awareness in today's world.

Sweeney's plan was initially developed into "The Global Challenge." Within two years, over 6,000 trainees, customer service representatives, and managers around the world have taken classes in cultural awareness. Being culturally competent involves more than just the knowledge of a culture. It requires the ability to recognize cultural differences and to recognize one's own potential biases and to transcend these to work together with those whose cultural context is different from one's own. At times we may tend to take the dynamics of culture for granted, because we are unaware of their effects on our daily lives. Not understanding one's own culture can seriously interfere with understanding the cultural elements in other people's thinking and behavior.

As we approach the end of a millennium, many countries are opening their doors to the international arena and thus providing domestic companies with more job opportunities. A study abroad program provides the necessary learning tools in today's world and is on the cutting edge of expanding career possibilities. Such a program can be used to build a foundation that establishes a framework of invaluable knowledge and skills. The program also builds character. Study abroad students stand out and have highly polished interpersonal techniques.

Perhaps the greatest asset of study abroad is the ability one develops to recognize and accept differences in the dimensions of other cultures, as well as to look upon one's own country and objectively realize its

shortcomings. An experience of this nature is one which can truly promote peace around the world.

In the opening comments of his book, Developing Intercultural Awareness, (1981) L. Robert Kohls makes an interesting statement about the need for cultural awareness:

> There is no more noble calling, in the last quarter of the twentieth century than to help the people of the world live together in peace and understanding, with a fully developed spirit of inquiry about other cultures and other ways.

When I arrived in Mexico, with my limited cultural skills, I felt as if I had splashed and thrashed my way across the Rio Grande, sometimes swimming and at other times nearly drowning. However, when I returned from my studies, I felt I had built a slender, but safe bridge between two cultures. Perhaps I can help others travel the cultural highway gracefully. Cultural awareness and keeping the lines of communication open between nations are not just good ideas, but they are the reality of maintaining good world relations. No matter what culture one is dealing with, communication is the tool, the medium binding all cultures around the world.

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